

## A STUDY OF THE PROTAGONIST'S ALTERITY EXHIBITED IN PAULO COELHO'S *THE WITCH OF PORTOBELLO*

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper focuses on the alterity of the protagonist as Sherine, Athena and as Hagia Sofia. The paper attempts to psychoanalyze the protagonist and her alterities. The protagonist is the 'self' originally named Sherine Khalil, but since she names herself Athena and prefers to be referred to by that name, Athena is considered to be the protagonist's 'assumed-self' while Hagia Sofia becomes the 'other'. The protagonist assumes the alterity of Athena instead of being Sherine, in order to bring out the courageous and independent side of her. The alterity of Hagia Sofia, on the other hand, is exhibited by the protagonist, only during those circumstances where she attains a trance-like state after celebrating the "Great Mother" through dance and concentration. Hagia Sofia is used as an alterity, to serve the protagonist's purpose of spreading messages to the gathering in a Spiritual tone.*

**KEYWORDS:** Alterity – 'Self', 'Assumed Self', 'Other', "Empty Spaces" and Inner-Self

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### INTRODUCTION

The novelist begins his novel *The Witch of Portobello* with the following verse from the Bible:

No man, when he hath lighted a candle, putteth it in a

Secret place, neither under a bushel, but on a

candle stick, that they which come in may see the light.

Luke 11:33

The novelist gives the readers an idea about the theme of the novel through the verse Luke 11:33. The verse talks about spreading the light and sharing it with all those who pass through that path. The novel revolves around the central character, Athena, who can be analyzed as the candle which gets lighted and spreads the light around to all the characters that cross her life and are willing to be lighted too. The light can be compared to the skills and talents the protagonist acquires along the way, in her life.

The protagonist, like the candle, is efficient to burn and spread light to those around her. Her desire to learn new arts is as powerful as the wick of a candle. Finally, the light spread can be analyzed as the knowledge she gains and is willing to share with those who are ready to do the same with her as well as others.

Being an adopted child, the protagonist is never made to feel so by the Khalils. Athena is educated and provided with the best. The Khalils have understood Athena's independent nature and respect her choices. The protagonist practices many art forms like dance and calligraphy to fill her "empty spaces". She even ventures

to her biological roots in order to find answers, with the hopes to fill the “empty spaces” inside her.

The protagonist, Sherine Khalil, calls herself Athena and is hence, identified by the characters as Athena. This is the first sign of Alterity displayed by the protagonist in the beginning of the novel. In the latter part of the novel, the protagonist, known to the characters and readers as Athena, begins to refer to her “divine side” (TWOP, 2007, p. 309) as Hagia Sofia.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Sarah-Leah Marques Pimentel’s research report titled “Two Encounters with the Cultural Other: Paulo Coelho’s *A Bruxa de Portobello* and its English Translation” (2010), deals with literary translation as a cultural mediator to understand the relationship between the post-colonial theories of the self and the other, by practically applying it to the Brazilian novelist’s work and its English translation. Antje Jackelen in “Response to Sarah Coakley” (2009), talks about blending mystery and rationality to nourish the intellectual as well as the spiritual heritage with reference to Paulo Coelho’s *The Witch of Portobello*. “The Self Experience of Otherness and the Shadows of Identity” (2007) by N. E. Coelho, Jr. talks about alterity in view of twenty-first century psychology.

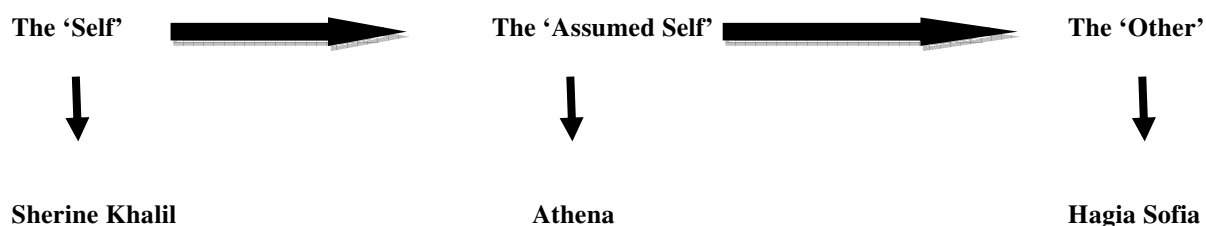
## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Chris Baldick in “Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms” (2008), defines alterity as:

A Latinate term meaning ‘otherness’, and commonly found in philosophy and literary theory since the 1970s. It often arises in analyses of relations between the self and the other (person), in discussions of encounters between different cultures, and in observations upon the difficulty of understanding the art and thought of past ages. (pp. 9-10)

In Paulo Coelho’s *The Witch of Portobello*, the protagonist, named Sherine Khalil, uses her alterities namely Athena and Hagia Sofia in order to grow, learn, venture and accomplish in life. It can be observed that Athena empowers Sherine in order to grow and venture out in life, thereby, accomplishing her dreams to find answers to her questions in life, while Hagia Sofia is displayed to convey certain ideas and opinions that might be accepted, when told to an audience in a more saintly stipulation.

The protagonist’s alterities can be illustrated in the following manner:



## PROTAGONIST’S ALTERITY: TRANSITION FROM ‘SELF’ TO ‘ASSUMED SELF’

The protagonist was named Sherine by the Khalils, her adoptive parents. Later, she started calling herself “Athena”, a name to which she related herself. The protagonist is aware of having been adopted by the Khalils. Though, she is loved by them and has never been told by her parents that she was adopted, she feels dejected when she learns of this news. However, the protagonist loves them dearly and decides to get over the fact of her being their adopted daughter. When the civil war breaks out, her father receives death threats as he worked for the Lebanese government but her father

decides to continue life in Lebanon. Athena, having overheard a phone conversation, decides to presume "filial responsibilities" to protect her loved ones. The following lines from the novel describe the style adopted by the protagonist to convince her parents to leave war-affected Lebanon as refugees to another country.

She performed a kind of dance and pretended that she'd gone into a trance...and started making pronouncements...how a mere child could possibly persuade adults to make decisions based on what she said...she was convinced that she'd saved the lives of her family. (TWOP, 2007, pp. 31-32)

The Khalils move to London as refugees, as a result of Athena's convincing skills. Athena's father having had re-established his business, lead a decent life unlike most refugees. The protagonist has attended good schools and pursues engineering which she later quits, in order to fulfill her dream. Apart from formal school education, the protagonist has attended dance classes, dance being her "passion".

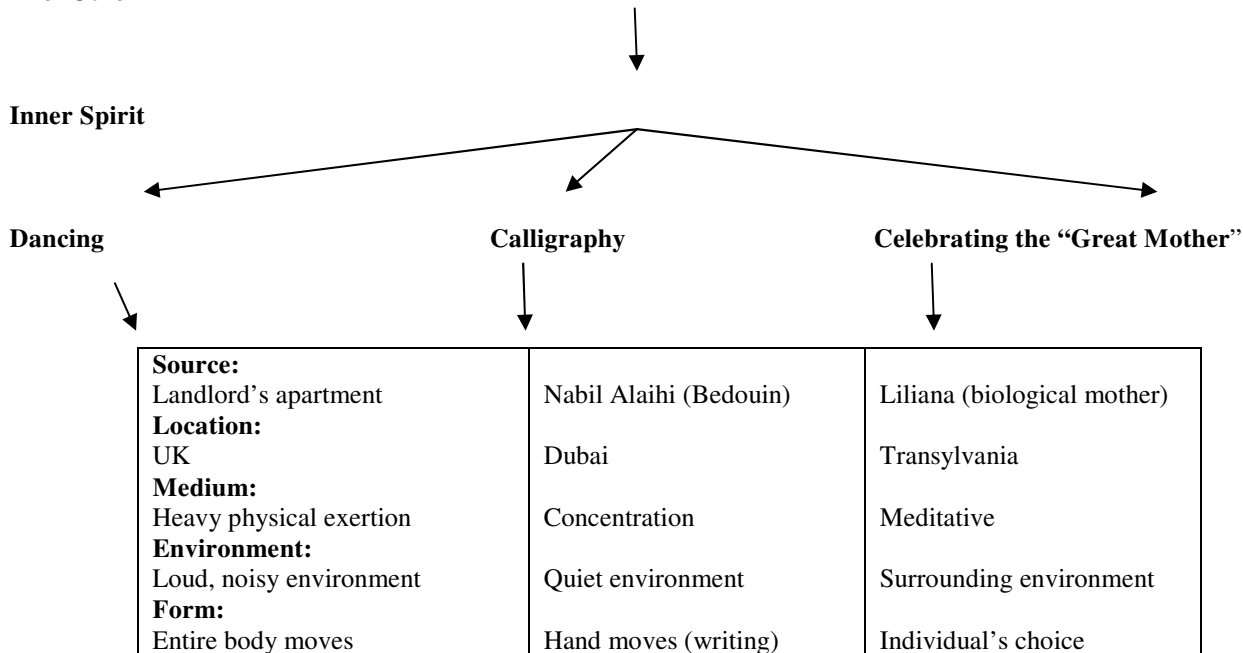
The protagonist is portrayed to be a charismatic, vibrant young woman. Athena decides to drop out of university and marry Lukas Jessen-Petersen. The protagonist, nineteen years of age at the time, decides to do so in order to become a mother. This wish of Athena can be associated with the emergence of her "empty spaces" caused by her emotional dejection of having been abandoned by her biological mother. Athena wishes to become a mother so as to shower all her love and care for her child, thereby, filling her own "empty spaces".

The protagonist clings on to her alterity named Athena, instead of being addressed to as Sherine, so as to mentally cross the troubling fact of her being the Khalil's adopted child, while her biological mother abandoned her. The protagonist uses her alterity called Athena as a shield to protect herself from her disturbing past and, in order to help her become a stronger personality. Athena, the protagonist's alterity, gives Sherine the courage and motivation to accomplish certain goals in life.

Lukas, the protagonist's ex-husband, in his testimony recounts Athena quoting Robert Frost's lines of taking the road "less travelled" (TWOP, 2007, p. 35). Through this incident it can be determined that the protagonist prefers to make her own choices. She does not want her decisions to be influenced by external factors such as family, culture, traditions society and the like. This characteristic feature of the protagonist can be viewed as the main cause for the exhibition of her alterity. Sherine is raised in a Lebanese Maronite Christian family, that follows the advocated beliefs and traditions. The protagonist being a free-spirited person calls her alterity as 'Athena' and lives an independent life. Athena overpowers Sherine in order to bury a blind traditional life in order to adopt an independent and courageous lifestyle.

## PROTAGONIST'S ALTERITY AS HAGIA SOFIA: THE 'OTHER'

### The 'Other'



The first instance, when Athena feels the essence of an inner spirit of herself is while dancing with her landlord's gathering. She experiences an inner power spread through her. The protagonist even shares this with her colleagues at the bank, eventually resulting in the bank to fare well among the other branches, leading Athena to work in Dubai. While in Dubai, Athena resigns her job at the bank and earns through selling real estate in Dubai.

In Dubai, Athena learns calligraphy from Nabil Alaihi, a Bedouin. The pauses in calligraphy are equated to the trances felt through dancing. The difference being, while dancing is a heavy form of physical exertion in a loud and noisy environment involving the entire body to move, calligraphy is practiced in a quiet environment exerting importance to concentration and pauses that involves only the movement of the writing hand as it is swayed to and fro and lifted, thereby creating the pauses.

Though each of the art forms learnt and practiced by the protagonist is to fill the "empty spaces", Athena continues to feel the "empty spaces" inside her. As the next resort, Athena decides to go to Romania in search of her biological mother, with the hope that if her questions are answered, her "empty spaces" might get filled.

Upon meeting and spending time with Liliana, the protagonist's biological mother, in Transylvania, Athena begins to comprehend Liliana and is introduced to the "Great Mother". Thereon, Athena practices celebrating the "Great Mother" in par with the environment encompassing her, including those willing to be part of the celebration. As the group grows into a larger gathering later becoming huge crowds, Athena displays her other alterity naming it as Hagia Sofia.

The novelist directly displays the spirit of alterity in the novel through the conversation between Heron and Athena through the following lines quoted from "The Witch of Portobello" (2007).

'Athena and her divine side, Hagia Sofia'

'I've grown used to doing this...it's a method I've discovered for getting in touch

with her, and now it's becoming a tradition in my life...The energy of love can never be lost – it is more powerful than anything and shows itself in many ways...That has always been the aim of everything I've looked for in my life – allowing love to manifest itself in me without barriers, letting it fill up my blank spaces, making me dance, smile, justify my life, protect my son, get in touch with the heavens, with men and women, with all those who were placed on my path.' (pp. 309-311)

## EFFECTS OF EXHIBITING ALTERITY

In Edda's testimony to the narrator, the following words are spoken about the protagonist:

Some chosen spirits emit a special light and are drawn to each other, and you – Sherine or Athena – are one of those spirits, but you need to work very hard to use that energy to your advantage...she was following the classic path of the witch...contact with the Divine Light is the greatest reality a human being can experience...(TWOP, 2007, P. 121)

It is quite evident in the novel the prejudiced and judgmental views upheld by the society in general despite the fact that even they follow certain beliefs and practices in their own form.

According to Paulo Coelho in his blog interview "Q&A" (2007),

A witch is a woman that is capable of letting her intuition take hold of her actions, that communes with her environment, that isn't afraid of facing challenges. In my latest novel, I precisely talk about the prejudice that modern witches face in modern society.

The novelist in an interview on his webpage says that 'witch' is a term used to refer to a woman not afraid to face challenges and is led by her intuitions. Paulo Coelho even gives us an example by using it in his novel TWOP. Many terminologies are hurled at the protagonist by the various characters in the novel but the novelist aims at bringing out her tolerance and power to reach the higher good in her attitude to life and people crossing paths with her.

The effects of the protagonist exhibiting her alterities can be summed up in the below given tabular manner:

<b>Edda's testimony</b>	<b>Coelho in an interview</b>	<b>Protagonist's climax</b>
✓ Chosen spirits emit special light	➤ Witch:	✓ Shares her knowledge with those willing/volunteering to learn
✓ Hard work is needed to use one's energy to advantage	✓ Actions are governed by intuitions	✓ Gatherings grow from apartment to need of bigger space
✓ Protagonist as following the classic path of the witch	✓ Communes with the environment	✓ Social hype is created
✓ Divine Light is the greatest reality one can experience	✓ Is not afraid of facing challenges	✓ Legal hearings are planned to separate her son from her
	➤ The novel (i.e.) <i>The Witch of Portobello</i> :	✓ Choice between spreading knowledge and son/family has to be made
	✓ Prejudice against modern witches in the modern society	✓ Need to fake death in order to protect her family

## CONCLUSIONS

The protagonist imbibes the name Athena while using Sherine Khalil, for legal purposes and later exhibits the alterity of Hagia Sofia. In both the cases, it can be noticed that the protagonist makes use of her alterities in order to display her feelings, emotions and opinions by hurting neither herself nor those around her. Athena, is the protagonist's alterity used to protect Sherine's fragile emotions and to make herself blossom into a strong and independent woman, while Hagia

Sofia is exhibited by the protagonist for the sake of spreading her knowledge about attaining the higher power existing as a part of the inner self. It is determined through the protagonist's statement "the part of me I call Hagia Sofia" (TWOP, 2007, p. 311) that, Athena too is an alterity of Sherine and that, the protagonist is consciously exhibiting her alterities.

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